Creation, Nature, and Paradise in the *Odes of Solomon* and Other Early Syriac Literature

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Background to the Odes

Although it was centuries before the present collection of the *Odes of Solomon* emerged from obscurity, the existence of these poems was suspected from a number of witnesses. The Latin Christian writer Lactantius (d. c. 325) cited *Ode* 19.6–7 as the prophetic utterance of King Solomon.[1] The Odes are mentioned in a canon list attributed to Nicephorus (ninth century) and later in a similar list falsely attributed to Athanasius and dating to the sixth or seventh century.[2]

However, it was not until the early nineteenth century that direct manuscript evidence emerged. First there was the Coptic-Gnostic work called the *Pistis Sophia*, preserved in a manuscript dating from the fourth or fifth century, containing five *Odes* translated from Greek.[3] Next, Papyrus Bodmer XI of the third to fourth century was discovered, with the Greek text of *Ode* 11.[4] Finally two Syriac manuscripts emerged, with between them, forty out of the original forty-two *Odes*. One of these manuscripts dates perhaps from the ninth to tenth centuries, and the other from the thirteen to fourteenth centuries.[5]

Many scholars have considered Greek to be the original language of the *Odes*, since some aspects of the Syriac form are more easily explained as misunderstandings of a Greek *Vorlage* than vice versa. However, the Odes are preserved in their most complete form in Syriac since only *Ode* 11 survives in Greek. Therefore, although it is the latest witness, the Syriac is the principal form in use.[6]

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[1] *Div. Inst.* 4.12.

[2] The *Odes* are described in Nicephorus' list as belonging to the group of texts relating to the Old Testament that are disputed and not regarded as canonical, along with 3 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Psalms of Solomon, Esther, Judith, Susanna, and Tobit. This is probably due to the attribution to Solomon and the pairing with *Psalms of Solomon*, despite the *Odes'* obvious late date and their affinity to Christian theology. See the Introduction to Charlesworth, *Odes of Solomon*, and Michael Lattke's more recent and thorough commentary on the Odes (Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*).

[3] *Odes* 1.1–5; 5.1–11; 6.8–18; 22:1–12; 25.1–12.

[4] P. Bodmer XI gives the whole of *Ode* 11 within a selection of biblical, apocryphal, and early patristic writings. Edition in Testuz, *Papyrus Bodmer X–XII*.

[5] The Syriac manuscripts have lacunae at each end but also contain the *Psalms of Solomon*, the two works together being labelled '*Psalms of Solomon.'* The parchment codex N from the Nitrian Desert of Egypt is the earlier witness; the paper codex from Mespotamia (MS Harris) shows signs of collation with another manuscript that no longer exists. There are two more Syriac manuscripts with only *Ode* 16.6–13, one from the 14th century and the other from the 16th century. See Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*, 3–5.

[6] For the Syriac text with an English translation, see Charlesworth, *Odes of Solomon*. However, the English renderings of the *Odes* in this paper are my own.

The earliest possible date of the original composition is the turn of the second or third century CE, that is, prior to its translation into Coptic and inclusion in the *Pistis Sophia*. On the basis of the themes and symbols employed by the Odist, Michael Lattke, whose knowledge of the *Odes* and the secondary literature on them is unrivalled, reckons that the original Greek *Odes* were composed in the first quarter of the second century CE.[7] The date of the Syriac translation is unknown, though likely to belong to the early stages of Christian Syriac literary culture, i.e. the late second or early third century.[8]

Syria has often been suggested as a possible place of origin for the *Odes*, since the closeness of the Greek and Syriac versions (as seen in *Ode* 11) may indicate a bilingual context for the composition, similar to that of Tatian's *Diatessaron* (Gospel Harmony) in the later second century.

The *Odes* make numerous allusions to biblical imagery and ideas, especially to Isaiah, Genesis, the Fourth Gospel, and 1 John. But they have very few if any actual citations of the biblical text. This feature may be connected to their poetic genre but also suggests a period when neither precise quotation nor a fixed scriptural text were important. Several of the key ideas in the Odes are conducive to a 'gnostic' interpretation because of their emphasis on 'knowledge' (γνῶσις, Syriac *īḏa'tā*) and its liberating effect on the believer.[9] However, that does not necessarily mean that they originated in a Gnostic community.

As Lattke notes, the terms Messiah, Son, Saviour, Father, Spirit all appear, but never the name 'Jesus' or that of any other biblical figures.[10] This gives a somewhat dehistoricizing effect, perhaps to be expected in a poetic work.

There is little sign that the *Odes* had much impact on later Syriac Christian thought, though their survival in two medieval manuscripts indicates that a few scribes took an interest in them.

1 Creation, Nature, and Paradise in the Odes

Any analysis of the Odist's theology must take into account the poetic genre he (or she) employs. Especially in the period of formative Christianity, hymns and religious poetry may reflect the views of an individual or community without being authoritative doctrinal statements.

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[7] Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 6–10.

[8] Non-Christian Syriac inscriptions date from the early first century CE. The books of the Syriac Peshitta Old Testament were rendered from Hebrew by Jews or Jewish converts sometime in the second century CE, according to Weitzman, *Syriac Version*.

[9] E.g., *Ode* 7.7, 1, 21, 23; 3; 8.8, 12; 17.7, 12; 26.12.

[10] Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*, 9.

A further caveat is that the editions and commentaries of the *Odes* are necessarily based on the Syriac version. This is the fullest available text but is likely to be a translation of a lost Greek *Vorlage* that was perhaps imperfectly understood at times. Also, in places inner-Syriac corruptions may have occurred in the course of the thousand years of transmission between the translation and the medieval witnesses.

I have focused on three key themes in the *Odes* and other early Syriac works: Creation as God's activity at the beginning of time; Nature imagery, especially trees, water and animals; and the relationship between the primordial Garden of Eden (representing Nature in its perfect state) and Paradise (a heavenly place for the blessed, expressed through metaphors taken from the description of Eden). Thus it covers aspects of the attitudes of early Syriac writers to cosmology, terrestriality, and teleology.

1.1 Creation

Creation in this context refers to God's primordial formation of the cosmos. The *Odes* certainly employ the Syriac word *brā'*, corresponding to Hebrew *bārā'*, and both of these words are found in the respective versions of Genesis ch. 1. But *brā'* is not the only term for creative activity used in the Odes. When speaking of God's creative action, the Syriac *Odes* also use *ʿ*^{a}*ḇaḏ*, 'make'; and *'aṯqen*, a verb that is difficult to render in English since it has a range of meanings including 'establish, fashion, order, arrange,' while later Syriac authors treat it as almost synonymous with *brā'*.

In later Syriac translations of Greek biblical texts, the title *bārūyā* 'Creator' regularly renders the Greek κτίστης, but in the *Odes* we do not find this term.[11] However, the Odist does state unequivocally that God is the agent of creation:

> For everything was revealed to you, as God,
> And fashioned (*maṯqan*) from the beginning (*men brešîṯ*)[12] before you …
> You, Lord, made (*ʿ*^{a}*ḇaḏ*) everything. (*Ode* 4.14–15)

Did the Odist understand God as the unassisted author of Creation? Some biblical texts associated wisdom closely with creation. In the Hebrew of the book of Proverbs, hypostasized and feminised Wisdom speaks of her origins and role in creation:

[11] E.g. Syriac Jdt 9:12; 4 Ezra 5:44, 2 Macc 1:24; 7:23; 13:14; 15:2; 4 Macc 11:5.

[12] *brešîṯ* is used in the Peshitta of Gen 1:1 to render Hebrew *b-rê'šîṯ,* 'in the beginning,' and is probably borrowed from Hebrew.

The LORD created/possessed me[13] as/at the beginning[14] of his way,
before[15] his works from long ago.
From of old I was established
at the first, from the origins of the earth.
When there were no depths I was given birth….
When he established the heavens I was there. (Prov 8:22–25, 27a)

Such poetic ambiguity led to theological questions for early interpreters: did God create wisdom, or merely possess her? Was wisdom the first of his created works?

The following passage in Prov 8:30–31 also presents a puzzle:

I was with him *'āmôn*
I was daily a delight [to him?],
playing before him at every moment,
playing in/with the world of his earth
and my delight (was) with humankind.

The Hebrew word *'āmôn* has been variously understood as 'craftsman,' 'constant,' or 'nursling,'[16] though the first option would suggest that Proverbs presents wisdom as directly involved in the action of creation, working alongside God. Alternatively, does the author merely present her as a charming witness to it? Certainly, the Septuagint Greek rendering of Prov 8.30 understood *'āmôn* to mean an artisan, since the translator rendered it with a term associated with carpentry, ἁρμόζουσα*:*

I was with him, *fitting together*
I was the one in whom he rejoiced.

The Syriac Peshitta version of Proverbs interprets in a similar way to the Septuagint since it translates *'āmôn* as the fem. sing. participle, *maṯqānā,* 'fashioning.'

The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish Greek composition perhaps dating from the first century CE, often develops wisdom themes from the Jewish scriptures, particularly Proverbs. Its unknown author follows the Septuagint's implication that Wisdom was a female artisan

[13] Heb. *qānānī.*
[14] Heb. *rēšîṯ.*
[15] Heb. *qedem.*
[16] See the discussion in Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 285–89.

involved in creation, as far as to say that she is the "craftswoman of all things" (πάντων τεχνῖτις) (Wis 7:21).[17]

However, in contrast to LXX and Peshitta Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, the Odist firmly states that wisdom was merely part of God's creation. He does not personify wisdom in any way, and does not give it any role in the act of creation:

He who created wisdom
Is wiser than his works. (*Ode* 7.8)[18]

The Odist makes it clear that God alone existed before creation, and states that all things came to be through God's word and thought:

There is nothing apart from the Lord[19]
Because he existed before anything came into being.
The ages/worlds[20] came into being through his word
And through the thought of his heart. (*Ode* 16.18–19)

Such downplaying of the role of wisdom, in comparison with early Jewish-Greek sources, probably reflects the theology of the Fourth Gospel, "in the beginning was the Word … everything came into being through him, and apart from him nothing came to be that exists" (John 1:1–3).

Earlier in the same poem, *Ode* 16, there is a summary of some of the earlier works of creation and their significance as described in Genesis ch. 1, including the making of the earth, sky, sea, and stars, and the roles of the sun and the night. These are not expressed quite as the binary opposites of sun/moon and light/darkness as in the text of Genesis:

He made the earth broad
And made the waters dwell in the sea
He stretched out the skies
And ordered[21] the stars

[17] Wis 14:2b also describes wisdom as an artisan. Cf. also Wis 8:6 where φρόνησις, 'understanding,' is a craftswoman of things that exist (εἰ δὲ φρόνησις ἐργάζεται, τίς αὐτῆς τῶν ὄντων μᾶλλόν ἐστιν τεχνῖτις; NRSV 'And if understanding is effective, who more than she is fashioner of what exists?'). However, this may imply that Wisdom shaped what had already been brought into being rather than initiating their creation.

[18] Compare also 'His [God's] heart is superior to all wisdom' (*Ode* 28.19).

[19] A probable allusion to Isa 45:5–7, 'I am the Lord God, and there is no God except me.… I am the one who fashioned light and made darkness' (Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*, 230).

[20] Syriac *'ālmē*.

[21] Syriac *'aṯqen*. See Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*, 226.

He ordered the creation[22] and established it
And rested from his works.
The created things run in their courses
And do their works
And do not know how to stop and cease
The powers[23] are obedient to his word
The sun is the treasury of the light
The night is the treasury of the darkness
The sun makes the day so that it may be bright[24]
But the night brings darkness upon the face of the earth. (*Ode* 16.10–16)

The precise sense of the next stanza, "(By[25]) their alternation they fulfill God's beauty" (*Ode* 16.17), has been the subject of some discussion. This is partly because the plural participle form found in the manuscript, referring to the sun and the night together, means 'fulfilling.' However, it has been suggested that this may be a corruption from the graphically very similar form for 'speaking.'[26] Probably the stanza refers to the complementarity and alternation of day and night that (depending on the reading) either fulfills or expresses the divine splendour.[27]

All in all, the references to the origins of Creation in the *Odes* reflect the influence of Genesis chs. 1–2 and John ch. 1. The Odist does not proceed any further in the biblical account to speak of the making of vegetation, animal life, or human beings, being entirely focused on cosmology in this *Ode*'s hymn of praise to the Maker.

Later Syriac writers are more explicit than the Odist in their adherence to the details in the description of Creation in Genesis. Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis* expounds the Syriac biblical version, rejecting any possible allegorical meaning and insisting on Creation *ex nihilo*.[28] Writing in the Persian Empire in the fourth century, as part of a stirring address of praise to God in his final *Demonstration*, Aphrahat alludes several times to Creation:

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[22] The Syriac term for 'creation' *brīṯā*' can also have the sense of 'creature,' especially in the plural as in v. 13 above (also *Ode* 4.7). Cf. also *Ode* 7.24: 'he gave a mouth to his creation, to open the voice of the mouth towards him and to praise him.'

[23] Probably referring to celestial beings such as angels, whose creation is not explicitly described in Genesis, though early Jewish interpreters (followed by Christian writers) assumed that it took place at an early stage.

[24] Or, 'He made the sun for the day, that it might be a luminary.'

[25] Contrary to the view of Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*, 229, without the addition of instrumental *beth* here the syntax is awkward.

[26] *mmlyn* versus *mmllyn*.

[27] See Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*, 230, who suggests a parallel in LXX Ps 18:2 for 'speaking.'

[28] See Amar, Mathews, and McVey, *St Ephrem*, specifically the *Commentary on Genesis*, pp. 67–123 on Gen chs. 1–3. The Syriac text was edited by Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri Commentarii*. Ephrem's concern is with a correct understanding of God's work in the face of heretical understandings of the cosmos (*Comm. Gen.* I.2–II.2). The later writer Jacob of Sarug (d. 520) wrote copiously on the Six Days of Creation, also following the biblical text, but his homilies on the Hexaemeron are poetic sermons, and thus somewhere between Ephrem's prose commentary on the one hand and the praises of the *Odist* and Aphrahat on the other.

> We worship you, Self-Existent One, who created us from nothing and formed us in the image of your likeness. … Your will carries all your creatures and your command ministers to all natural beings … what was and is, is yours; all natural beings have been designated by you. (*Dem*. 23.58)[29]

2 Nature imagery

2.1 Trees

Trees feature prominently in *Ode* 11, as also in the Hebrew Bible. In the countries of the Mediterranean and Near East, an appreciation of trees for their shade is reflected in biblical imagery.[30] But their provision of fruit without significant human input (in contrast to the labour required for vineyards and cereal crops) is an especially prominent theme in the early Syriac sources, and often related to the appearance of fruit-bearing trees that the Genesis narrative ascribes to God's action in the Garden of Eden before the Fall (Gen 2:9).

Ode 11, the only one preserved in both Greek and Syriac, has some additional stanzas in Greek describing Paradise:[31]

And he led me to his Paradise
Where there is the richness of the Lord's delight.
+ *Greek*:
I gazed at beautiful fruit-bearing trees
And natural was their garland
Their wood thrived
and their fruits laughed.
From immortal earth are their roots
And a river of joy was watering them
Around the earth of their eternal life. (*Ode* 11.16 a–f)

In the following lines, believers themselves are depicted as trees:

And I said, 'Blessed, Lord, are those who are planted in your earth
And who have a place in your Paradise
And grow with the growth of your trees

[29] Pierre, *Aphraate le Sage persan*, 2:118–20. Syriac text in Parisot, *Aphraatis sapientis Persae demonstrationes*. In §§58–61, Aphrahat cites fron Pss 8 and 104, Isa 40 and 66, as well as from Gen 1–2, reflecting his profound knowledge of scripture.
[30] E.g., Judg 9:15; Job 4:22; Ps 80:10; Ezek 31:3, 6, 12; Dan 4:1; Mark 4:32.
[31] See the discussion in Charlesworth, *Odes of Solomon*, 11–12. He believes these stanzas are authentic and translated from a 'Semitic' manuscript, but omitted by mistake in the Syriac version. Lattke is less convinced (*Odes of Solomon*, 165).

And have departed from darkness to the light.' (*Ode* 11.18–19)

As well as obvious connections with God's planting of trees in in the primordial garden in Gen 2:9, there may be some influence from well-known passages such as Ps 1:1–3 and Jer 17:8,where the devout man is compared to a fertile fruit tree planted by streams of water.[32] In fact, in another *Ode* the speaker states that he or she was planted by the Lord himself, and continues:

For he himself set the root
And watered, prepared, and blessed it.
Its fruits are forever.
It went deep and ascended and spread widely
It became full and great.
The Lord alone was praised by his planting and his husbandry
By his care and his lips' blessing
By his right hand's lovely planting
And the existence[33] of his planting. (*Ode* 38.17–21) [34]

Composed more than two centuries after the *Odes*' composition, St Ephrem's many *madrāšē* or teaching hymns include a great deal of nature imagery. As Sebastian Brock has noted, for Ephrem, Nature and Scripture provide key testimony to humans for the role of God as Creator, as is explicitly stated in his *Hymns on Paradise* (henceforth *HdP*):[35]

In his book Moses described
The creation of the natural world,
So that both Nature and Scripture
Might bear witness to the creator:
Nature, through man's use of it
Scripture, through his reading it;
They are the witnesses
Which reach everywhere,
They are to be found at all times,
Present at every hour,

[32] Allusions to both these passages also appears in Aphrahat, *Dem*. 6.1.
[33] Reading *šḳyḥwt'* with the manuscripts.
[34] On the plant and planting metaphors in this *Ode*, see von Gemünden, *Vegetationsmetaphorik*, 385.
[35] Brock, *St Ephrem the Syrian*, 41–42. When quoting Ephrem's Paradise hymns I have cited Brock's English translation. Syriac text in Beck, *Ephraem*. Beck also produced a German translation as an accompanying volume: Beck, *Ephraem – Translation*.

Confuting the unbeliever
Who defames the Creator. (*HdP* 5.2)

In addition, Ephrem frequently employs nature imagery metaphorically and symbolically in his poetic works. In his *Hymns on Paradise* trees are an important symbolic link between the Garden of Eden described in Genesis chs. 2–3 and the eschatological Paradise offered to the faithful in a reversal of the Fall, and which is the main focus of this series of hymns. Ephrem writes that the righteous whose lives bear fruit will be rewarded by entry into Paradise, where the trees of the heavenly Garden will provide fruit, blossom, and garlands.[36] Women who have supported the poor and the saints during their lives are rewarded by receiving food from the boughs of the trees of Paradise.[37]

Ephrem contrasts Paradise with the world as it stands: the cycle of seasons with their sharp contrasts is part of the fallen state of the world. (Similarly, in the next hymn he describes the the absence of heat and frost in Paradise.)[38] He even compares their cyclical nature to a prostitute, fertile but promiscuously consorting with each of the months to produce fruit from all of them. In contrast, the air of celestial Paradise is chaste and pure and produces fruit and food abundantly all year round,[39] as exemplified in its trees:

In Paradise the life cycle of the trees
Resembles a necklace:
When the fruits of the first are finished and plucked,
Then the second ones are ready,
With a third species following them. (*HdP* 10.11)

Ephrem looks to the renewal and transformation of heaven and earth in another of the *Hymns on Paradise:*

In the world there is struggle,
in Eden a crown of glory.
At our resurrection both earth and heaven will God renew,
liberating all creatures,
granting them paschal joy, along with us.

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[36] *HdP* 6.11–13. Aphrahat makes a similar statement in *Dem*. 6.6. Although the most obvious biblical allusion would be Rev 22:2 (the fruit of the Tree of Life), in fact this book was not in the Syriac canon until the following century.
[37] *HdP* 7.20.
[38] *HdP* 11.2.
[39] *HdP* 10.5–6.

Upon our mother Earth, along with us,
did he lay disgrace
when he placed on her, with the sinner, the curse;
so, together with the just, will he bless her too;
This nursing mother,[40] along with her children,
shall God who is good renew. (*HdP* 9.1)

Since Ephrem elsewhere stresses the unproductivity laid upon the Earth after the Fall as a result of God's curse (Gen 3:17),[41] this depiction of Earth as a nursing mother is rather unusual for him.

2.2 Water

Water is mentioned several times in the *Odes* in various forms and functions. Although it was once suggested that the *Odes* were baptismal hymns,[42] this interpretation has been discarded. Furthermore, *Ode* 24 that otherwise may allude to Christ's own baptism never refers to either water or a river. But in the context of a Near Eastern society reliant on seasonal rainfall, springs, and perennial rivers, metaphorical references to water in the *Odes* reflect the high value placed on this often scant resource.

Among the many metaphors taken from nature in *Ode* 11, there is the vivid image of drinking copiously from the Lord's generous living spring, to the point of spiritual inebriation and consequent enlightenment:

Speaking water[43] approached my lips
From the Lord's spring of life in his generosity.
I drank and was intoxicated
[By] the immortal water.
My drunkenness was not for irrationality:
Instead, I turned from empty things
To the Most High, my God. (*Ode* 11.6–9)[44]

[40] An image also found in *HdP* 11.1, but this time of the air of Paradise 'suckling' Adam.,
[41] *Comm. Gen.* II.31; VI.5.
[42] E.g., Bernard, *Odes of Solomon*.
[43] 'Speaking' probably refers to the bubbling sound of fresh water, as opposed to the silence of still water in a cistern or well.
[44] Translation based on the Greek form; the Syriac is slightly different.

Similar imagery dominates the short *Ode* 30, where the speaker encourages the spiritually thirsty to "draw water for yourselves from the living spring of the Lord" and prefers its sweetness to honey.

As well as these divinely granted springs, we find "the Lord's rain" in *Ode* 35.1–2, its cloud overshadowing and guarding the speaker, and granting salvation. For northern Europeans who find clouds and rain nothing to celebrate, such positive imagery is strange. However, the striking depiction of dangerously flooded rivers is especially familiar, following the recent extreme weather events in many parts of the world:

Mighty rivers, the power of the Lord,
That turn upside down
those who despise him
Entangling their steps,
damaging their crossing points
Seizing their bodies
and destroying their souls
For they are more sudden and swift than lightning. (*Ode* 39.1–4)

Although Michael Lattke relates this to the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus,[45] that seems unlikely: the Odist describes them as rivers, not a sea. It is more likely that he has experienced the great rivers of Syria and Mesopotamia,[46] as well as the sudden filling of wadis after a storm that can catch the traveller unaware, and so he uses the image as a metaphor for the hazards of unbelief.

Similar imagery also appears in *Ode* 6:6–18, and again relates to the power of the Lord, manifested first as a small stream that becomes progressively wider, flooding and smashing everything in its path, and bringing it to the 'temple.' The Odist adds that not even water engineers are able to restrain its power (6.9). The river's flood fills the earth and then becomes more benign in its effects, a source of drink for the thirsty and healing for the crippled and dying.

Ephrem's *Genesis Commentary* discusses in some detail the creation of water in Genesis ch. 1.[47] His focus on types of water —salty, stagnant, fresh, or bitter — reflects day-

[45] Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 540–41, though he does concede that the danger from rivers was well-known in the region.
[46] A detailed entry in the Syriac *Chronicle of Edessa* for 201 CE, claimed to be from the city archives, relates to the flooding of the city of Edessa by the river Daysan following a rainstorm. It describes the destruction of the king's palace and the church, as well as the deaths of many people, followed by the measures taken to prevent a similar event (Cowper, "Selections from the Syriac," 30–31).
[47] *Comm. Gen.* I.10–13.

to-day concerns of people in antiquity for whom a fresh water source was a pressing issue. His concerns are both semi-scientific and exegetical. Seas are salty, he says, in order to prevent stagnation and putrefaction, while rivers flow into the seas to replenish them. He tries to answer possible questions arising from the scriptural text: if all water under the firmament was in a single place (Gen 1:9), how did some of it become salty and the rest remain sweet? What did Noah do in the Ark when its passengers needed fresh water, since God only told him to take food with him, and how would agriculture have been possible after the Flood if the land had been drenched in salty water? Ephrem's response is that at the moment when the gathered waters were named "seas" by God (Gen 1:10), their nature changed. And the waters of the Flood were kept from contamination from salt by remaining in a separate layer above the sea water. As for the waters above the firmament, these are still but not stagnant, because they are uncontaminated by contact with the earth, and they do not evaporate because they do not lie under the sun. They are reserved for the production of "dews of blessing" and "floods-gates of [divine] anger."[48]

A similar concern for the coherence of Scripture can been seen in Ephrem's comments on the river flowing from Eden to irrigate the garden there (Gen 2:10). Because the Syriac version renders 'garden' as 'Paradise,'[49] Syriac tradition understands the place as more than terrestrial. So Ephrem finds it problematic to consider the trees there as in need of water and takes the statement as metaphorical. He says that the four tributaries from it (identified as the Danube, Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates) taste different from the Edenic source, because they are affected by the accursed earth they flow over. Similarly, in one of his *Hymns on Paradise* Ephrem describes the inferiority quality of the waters of Paradise by the time they reach 'us' because they acquire the flavours of our land.[50] Yet elsewhere he expresses this difference more positively: the river that goes forth brings some of Paradise's blessings in order to 'heal' the pollution of the earth's springs caused by the curses.[51]

2.3 Animals

For modern readers, the lack of interest in living creatures in the *Odes* is somewhat surprising. Exceptional references are to the dove flying onto the head of the Messiah and singing over him (presumably alluding to the baptism of Christ), to which the birds react by ceasing to fly

[48] Alluding to Deut 33:28 and Gen 7:11.
[49] Probably from the influence of ancient Near Eastern ideas and Ezek 28:13–14, Ephrem sees Paradise as a mountain: see Brock, *St Ephrem the Syrian*, 51–54.
[50] *HdP* 2.8–9.
[51] *HdP* 11.11.

and "creeping things" by dying in their holes;[52] also the simile of doves and their nestlings used of the action of the Spirit's wings upon the Odist.[53]

Ephrem mentions the role of animals in the divine scheme in that he contrasts them negatively to the status of human beings. He describes God's dispensation to the animals he created as the freedom to commit adultery or theft without shame or guilt, and to enjoy comfort, "for they are above care and shame." Ephrem states that "[animals] have no resurrection, neither are they subject to blame." He contrasts with them the "fool" who actually *chooses* to be an animal rather than a human in order to pursue his desires without judgment.[54] The slightly later anonymous Syriac work known as the *Book of Steps* (or *Liber Graduum, LG*)[55] takes a similar line: Adam's sin is defined as wanting to be physical or carnal rather than spiritual, desiring sex under the teaching of the "evil one" who had plotted to make him fall from the holy state of continence of the angels and to imitate wild beasts instead.[56]

In contrast, Aphrahat locates the special status of humans in creation in Adam's divine "conception" in the mind of God before his physical creation. This meant that the first man knew his maker, and God was conceived within the thought of humans; however, if the "sons of Adam" do not know their maker, God is not conceived within them nor dwells with them, and they are considered by God to be as animals and other creatures.[57] Aphrahat does stress that God takes care of his creation, including animals and cattle. He cites a number of biblical laws and verses in Psalms where God is depicted as caring for and feeding birds and cattle: "God is concerned for all his creation and he overlooks nothing."[58] However, Aphrahat does not mandate human care of animals, perhaps considering that this is God's task.

Ephrem's main prose work, the long *Commentary on Genesis*, spells out more systematically than his *Hymns* Adam's role in relation to animals. As also Greek Christian writers in the early period, Ephrem states that the way in which Adam was the image of God was in his dominion over the earth and its creatures. However, Ephrem then has to explain how such authority could have been exercised if Adam had remained in the blessed place of Paradise, separate from the world. Ephrem teaches that this dominion of the world was in fact

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[52] *Ode* 24.1–2, 4.

[53] *Ode* 28.1.

[54] *HdP* 12.19–20. Sebastian Brock notes that the Peshitta's rendering of Gen. 1:26 (NRSV "let them have dominion over [the animal world]") is "have authority over them," which may imply responsibility rather than mere subjugation, cf. also Wisd 9:2–3, as well as in some other works of Ephrem (Brock, "Animals and Humans," 1–9).

[55] For an English translation, see Kitchen and Heal, *Book of Steps*. The Syriac text is in Kmosko, *Liber Graduum*.

[56] *LG* 15.1. Taking up a saying from Clement of Alexandria, the author of the *Book of Steps* says that he watched the animals and desired to become like them and hated the angel's celibacy (*LG* 15.7; cf. 21:10). For the general background to such views, see Salvesen, "Without Shame or Desire," 307–26; Salvesen, "Imitating the Watchers," 1–25.

[57] *Dem*. 17.7. For discussion of this passage, see Childers, *Virtuous Reading*, 47–49.

[58] *Dem*. 13.9.

a kind of fall-back policy on God's part: God had foreseen Adam's sin that would lead to his expulsion, and so this was essentially 'Plan B.'[59]

Unusually for a patristic writer, Ephrem has a reputation for being interested in the female characters of the Bible and for having a high view of women generally. Notably, Ephrem describes the role of Eve after her creation as care for the domestic animals, as well as helping Adam construct farm buildings and pens, and he speaks of her diligence in this respect.[60]

3 Paradise[61]

The term 'Paradise' derives originally from a Persian word meaning a walled enclosure. Through biblical Greek it gradually acquired associations with a blessed post-mortem state. First of all, Genesis ch. 2 uses the Hebrew word *gan*, 'garden,' for the place created by God. [62] In the mid-third century BCE the Jewish Greek translator rendered this as παράδεισος, a term that in Hellenistic Egypt referred to a market garden or orchard.[63] It was only later in Hellenistic Judaism that this Greek term took on such major significance. References elsewhere in Scripture to the 'garden of God,' especially in Ezekiel ch. 31 in both Hebrew and Greek, contributed to the idea that this garden was not just a place of mythical fertility and beauty but also where God might be present with his blessed ones, as he was with Adam and Eve before their disobedience.[64]

In the New Testament there are just three direct references to Paradise: Luke 23:43, where Jesus promises the penitent thief that he will be with him in Paradise; 2 Cor 12:4 where Paul speaks of someone being snatched up to heaven while still alive; and Rev 2:7 where there is a promise to give the victorious saint to eat from the tree of life in the Paradise of God. The three verses reflect the notion that one could hope for a restoration of the state of bliss and enjoyment of the divine presence originally enjoyed by the first couple, along with the gift of eternal life that Adam and Eve were not permitted to enjoy.

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[59] *Comm. Gen*. I.31.

[60] *Comm. Gen*. II.11.

[61] Although Syriac sources are not included, there is a valuable collection of essays on early views of Paradise: Bockmuehl and Stroumsa, *Paradise in Antiquity*.

[62] 'Eden' is etymologically connected to the Hebrew root *'dn* meaning 'delight', 'pleasure' and so is often rendered in the Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible as τρυφή: LXX Gen 3:23, 24; 49:20; Pss 35 (MT 36): 9; 138 (MT 139):11; Joel 2:3; Jer 28 (MT 51):34; Lam 4:5; Ezek 28:13; 31:16, 18; 36:35.

[63] For the development in sense, see Lee, *Lexical Study*, 53–56. The late biblical books Song 4:13, Qoh 2:5, Neh 2:8 use the Persian loanword in its Hebrew form *pardēs*, rendered in all three of these instances with παράδεισος by LXX translators, who also use παράδεισος regularly for *gan*.

[64] See also Gen 13:10; Joel 2:3; cf. Isa 51:3; Ezek 28:13; 31:8, 9; Pss. Sol. 14.3.

So primordial Paradise and eschatological Heaven are certainly fused by the time of early Christianity. They are especially closely linked in early Syriac thought, no doubt since the Peshitta Old Testament uses the loanword *pardaisā* consistently for *gan* in Genesis chs. 2–3 and in other verses referring to the garden of God or Eden. The main aspiration after death, especially for ascetics, is to enter Paradise by means of a virtuous and abstemious life. This notion is especially prominent in Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*.

Paradise in the *Odes* is described in similar terms to the garden of Genesis chs. 2–3, and it is evidently seen as a blessed place where the believer can be in God's presence. However, for the Odist the enjoyment of Paradise indicates neither a return to the pre-lapsarian Eden nor a post-mortem state. Rather, Paradise is a spiritual state in the 'here and now,' granted to the recipients of the divine Knowledge, who have cast off ignorance and folly.

And he led me to his Paradise
Where there is the richness of the Lord's delight…
And I said, 'Blessed, Lord, are those who are planted in your earth
And who have a place in your Paradise
And grow with the growth of your trees
And have departed from darkness to light…
For there is much room in your Paradise
And there is nothing idle in it
But everything is full of fruit
Glory to you, God, delight that is in the eternal Paradise! (*Ode* 11.16, 18–19, 23–24).[65]

Since the action of *Ode* 11 is presented as a past event, it could be argued that the first-person speaker is describing what has happened to him after death. However, the speaker's exhortation in *Ode* 20 suggests that this blessing may in fact be appropriated in the present life:

But clothe yourself with the Lord's generous grace
And enter his Paradise
And make for yourself a garland from his tree.
And put it on your head and be glad
And recline upon his rest. (*Ode* 20.7–8)

[65] Greek: *glory to you, God, with your Paradise of eternal delight*. Brock (*St Ephrem the Syrian,* 193) suggests that the stress on Paradise's productivity in *Ode* 11.23 may be alluded to by Ephrem:

> Nothing there in Paradise is useless,
> both grass and roots bring benefit and profit...
> the fruits of Paradise bear rich wealth for those who gather them. (*HdP* 7.21)

The idea of clothing oneself with grace can be compared with other such imagery in the *Odes*. Putting on and taking off are both found in *Ode* 11:[66]

And I left foolishness[67] cast off upon the earth
And I stripped it off and cast it from me.
The Lord renewed me with his garment
And revived[68] me by his light. (*Ode* 11.10–11)

This passage in *Ode* 11 is linked explicitly to Paradise, since the speaker later describes how the Lord leads him there (11.16). Clothing imagery is found widely in early Syriac literature in connection with Eden.[69] An originally Jewish tradition holds that when Adam and Eve sinned, they were stripped of the glorious garments that God had made for them and so became aware of their nakedness.[70] In some Syriac sources, Christians seek to recover this clothing. As Brock explains, "the whole aim of God's subsequent plan of salvation is to reclothe humanity in this primordial garment of glory … and return it [sc. humanity], not to primordial paradise, but to the eschatological paradise where there will be access to the Tree of Life (also identified with Christ himself)."[71]

The *Odes*, however, do not include the idea that humans had been stripped naked of their original glory: the speaker in *Ode* 11.10 describes himself as already clothed, but in foolishness, which he removes so that the Lord may clothe him in grace (cf. also *Ode* 20.7 above).

The *Odes* also suggest a 'realized' eschatology, in which the believer is apparently already able to enjoy Paradise through divine grace.[72] In contrast, in later Syriac theology, entry into Paradise is post-mortem and conditional on ethical behaviour in addition to faith, as Ephrem expresses it:[73]

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[66] Michael Lattke has a useful table of references in the *Odes* where metaphors of putting on or taking off are used: believers put on grace, the Lord, incorruption, holiness, light, joy, love and so on (Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* Table 2, p. 54).

[67] ἀφροσύνη.

[68] ἀνεκτήσατο, versus Syriac *wa-qnany*, 'and possessed me': see Lattke's discussion of the mistranslation, *Odes of Solomon,* 162–63.

[69] Brock, "Clothing Metaphors," 11–40; reprinted in Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, IX.

[70] According to the early Jewish midrashic work Genesis Rabbah 20:12, the Torah scroll of Rabbi Meir at Gen 3:21 read not *koṯnôṯ ʻôr*, 'garments of skin' (to cover the couple's nakedness after they sinned), but *koṯnôṯ ʾôr* 'garments of light' (i.e., '*aleph* for *ʻayin*). This was joined with a pluperfect understanding of the verb to give the sense 'God *had* made them garments of light and clothed them [before they sinned]'.

[71] Brock, *Treasure-House*, 36.

[72] See Murray, *Symbols*, 254–55.

[73] Brock notes that for Ephrem the key to the door of eschatological Paradise "lies in conduct on earth" (*Treasure-house,* 37–38). The later poet-theologian Jacob of Sarug provides an even more developed treatment such themes in his *Hymn on the Soul*: "O Soul, … who has stripped you of your beauty? In Paradise full of blessings you were resplendent.... You were clothed in rays of light! The

> Blessed is he
> for whom Paradise yearns
> Yes, Paradise yearns for the man whose goodness
> makes him beautiful…
> This is the gate of testing
> that belongs to Him who loves mankind.
> … According to the stature and rank
> attained by each person,
> (the Door of Paradise) shows by its dimensions
> whether they are perfect or lacking in something. (*HdP* 2.1–2)

Yet despite the detailed poetic descriptions that Ephrem employs, he warns that these are only images, and not reality, because Paradise is beyond human comprehension:

> My intellect … perceived the splendour of Paradise—
> not indeed as it really is,
> but insofar as humanity is granted to comprehend it.[74] (*HdP* 1.3)

It is of course similarly unlikely that the author of the *Odes of Solomon* intended his own descriptions of Paradise to be taken literally.

4 Conclusion

Overall, compared with the *Odes*, later Syriac works accord a much greater role to the form and interpretation of Scripture. The *Odes* are much more allusive and of course they do not reflect the efforts of the intervening centuries in forming a body of authoritative Scripture and synthesising a coherent theology of salvation. At the same time, they clearly reflect the scriptural concept of God as creator of all things, without assistance (contrast, for example, the role given to the demiurge in Philo of Alexandria's work).

Regarding the natural world, although the Odist and Ephrem show a keen appreciation of trees and of water, neither shows real interest in animals. In fact, Ephrem, Aphrahat, and the

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Accursed One … stole my clothes, and so I stood naked…. Return of Soul, to Eden, which is gazing out for you. Strip off your rags and the leaves that cover your nakedness; Take and put on the glorious robe, Enter into Eden which is opened up and awaits you" (Brock, *Treasure-House,* 267–70).

[74] Brock, *St Ephrem the Syrian,* 78. Murray, *Symbols*, 259–62, notes Ephrem's belief that the Church is the fulfilment of the promises made in the Garden and is also "the type of the eschatological paradise," a topic that lies outside the scope of this paper.

Book of Steps make a clear distinction between the status of humans and that of animals. There is no sense in any of these early Syriac writers that humans have some kind of divinely ordained obligation to care for animals either for their own sake or for the sake of the whole of nature.

Regarding Paradise, both distant and realized eschatological outlooks in the early sources surveyed centre on a personal state of salvation represented metaphorically by the primordial Garden, a 'natural' space that is in fact managed and planted by God, rather than by 'wild' nature. However, the Garden seems to have been preferred as a representation of the realm of the blessed, rather than alternative images taken from the built environment such as a temple or a city.

Why do these texts focus on the Garden, and show so little interest in the natural world beyond it? All the Syriac texts surveyed above were produced between the second and fifth centuries, in a pre-industrial society that also pre-dates the agricultural revolution by more than a millennium. Agricultural activity and animal husbandry was vital but hard work, subject to vagaries of weather and 'acts of God.' The idea of the primordial Garden appealed as a place where food had grown without human toil and without the curse of 'thorns and thistles' of Gen 3:17–19. In the promised life to come in Paradise, there would be no need for food, or desire for sex, or procreation, and this would be a rest from striving, a blessed 'Sabbath.'

Some Syriac writers in the fourth and fifth centuries, especially the author of the *Book of Steps*, explicitly valorize the ascetics who live only to pray and worship and whose physical needs are supported by the surrounding communities. The 'ordinary' people in the villages are portrayed in the book as second-class Christians, at best the 'just,' rather than the 'perfect' believers who aspire to anticipate the angelic life by giving up every aspect of normal life. The task of ordinary folk in Antiquity — and also today in the less industrialized world — was to produce enough food for their own survival, and to domesticate animals for their own benefit, in the face of the uncertainties of the climate and the weather. No doubt religious teachings that stressed humans' divinely granted superiority over the natural world, in addition to holding out hope for an immortal life without toil, also helped people to cope by giving their day-to-day struggle a meaning and purpose.

In our current situation where humanity has dominated the environment to an unhealthy and dangerous degree, especially in the industrial world, it is easy to look back and criticise the aspirations of our spiritual ancestors, who could never have foreseen the degradation of the environment that has taken place in just the last two or three centuries.

However, regarding the Syriac works themselves, it is important to recognise their purpose and genre, and not criticise them for their lack of environmental consciousness. Thus,

the *Odes of Solomon* in particular need to be read as poetic praise literature rather than doctrine, though their emphasis that we are creatures and not self-existent is a useful reminder. Ephrem's vast output of *madrāšē,* teaching hymns, set out to counter heretical views and Judaizing tendencies among the local Christians in Nisibis and Edessa in the middle third of the fourth century. Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* exhort the faithful in a time of persecution by the Sassanid Persians. The *Liber Graduum* persuades Christians to aim for 'perfection' that goes beyond observing religious norms. We need to accord these sources a 'tolerant' reading regarding what they say or do not say about the created world of nature.

At the same time their statements and omissions may also be repeated in later Christian theologies to the present day. For instance, the Odist's stress on personal salvation and the attainment of incorruption through knowledge is centred on the individual. A longing for the fulfilment of our encounter with God in a 'Paradise' in a spiritual realm transcending even the best of the natural world is not a bad thing in itself. However, such hope should be accompanied by a full recognition of our own present selves as part of God's physical, good creation (Genesis ch. 1); as embodied beings interconnected with other embodied beings, with physical needs for food security and shelter, and all of us dependent on the well-being of our global environment.

Another rebalancing required within faith communities is to accept that loving one's neighbour as oneself means working for the equitable provision of the necessaries of life for others. This would also involve resistance to consumerism and a deepened sensitivity to its impact on the natural world.

Studying the *Odes of Solomon* on Creation, Nature, and Paradise may stimulate a reconsideration of the idea implicit in some religious texts that believers transcend the natural order, rather than partaking more fully of it: does eschatology have a tendency to become escapology? Yet should we not be using our knowledge and discernment of 'good and evil' (in the widest ethical sense) to protect both the environment and the well-being of humanity?

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